[This was published in *Looking for the Enemy* (Addendum 4) and in *Chomsky, Prouty and Me* (1994.11.05).

Nov. 5, 1994

Open Reply to Michael Parenti's Open Letter to me of Oct. 30, 1994.

Copy to COPA

Dear Michael,

Thanks for your reply to my letter to Newman. I realize that exaggerated suspicions are counterproductive, but I don't think my questions to John are exaggerated or that they constitute an ad hominem attack. I would ask the same of anyone with an intelligence background. My questions in that regard are not rhetorical. I don't think people "retire" from intelligence work the way other people retire. The oaths they take are binding for life, and not trivial. Philip Agee, for example, the first CIA renegade, still has to submit to CIA censorship. For him to admit that (as he did to me), or for me to say it here, does not cast doubt on his "integrity and motives," as you imply my questions to Newman do. On the contrary, being open and honest about it speaks for one's integrity. Perhaps John will welcome the opportunity to clear the air. That is the spirit in which I challenged him.

Of course you are right that I (or you) could be similarly challenged, but the analogy is not very fair. I do not have an intelligence background. I did not predict that our investigations would not point to an institutional conspiracy on the part of the CIA, but rather (perhaps) to a conspiracy of certain rogue elements within that institution. I did not write a book that minimizes the CIA's role in promoting the war in Vietnam, presents William Colby as an early "critic" of US war policy, is highly praised by Colby on the cover jacket, and in my opinion muddles the crucial question of when the intelligence assessment of the situation in Vietnam actually changed.

On that last point, you say I could be accused of "salvaging Chomsky's research," but since you haven't read Newman's book I have to wonder how much you've really thought about this. I disagree strongly with Chomsky on the importance of the assassination(s), the (false) dichotomy of "conspiracy" vs. "structural" critique, and specifically on the Vietnam withdrawal issue, but the point I made to Newman was that Chomsky makes it clear that the intelligence assessment changed radically after the assassination. Newman's account implies that it changed before the assassination. This is a crucial difference, and if I find Chomsky's account here clearer and more convincing, it doesn't mean I buy his overall argument. On the contrary, I was trying to point out the irony of Chomsky clarifying the very fact that contradicts his own overall thesis of continuity in JFK's and LBJ's Vietnam policy--a fact whose significance Chomsky obviously refuses to see.

It might interest you to know that I tried, in the course of a long and intensive correspondence with Chomsky (before Rethinking Camelot came out), to get him to state his position as follows: JFK's withdrawal plan was reversed, after the assassination, because the assessment of the military situation was reversed (also after the assassination). This is in fact his position, but you will see that in his book, as in his letters to me, he refuses to put it this way because he is so determined to make the truly specious argument that "there was no withdrawal policy." The reason is obvious to me, and I told him so: Once you admit that there was a radical policy change immediately after the assassination (exactly when doesn't matter), you must deal with the question of the possible relation between the two events. (I said this in my COPA talk too, but I guess you missed it.) That means you are automatically involved in "conspiracy theory," which is anathema to Chomsky (and others like Alexander Cockburn and the late I.F. Stone) for I suppose ideological or psychological reasons. The other alternative is to admit the withdrawal policy reversal but deny any relation to the

assassination, as Arthur Schlesinger does. This is naive and irrational, as Schlesinger's hysterical condemnation of the Stone film amply demonstrates. Chomsky does not want to appear naive and irrational, so he has manufactured a tortuous and false argument that there was never a withdrawal policy ("without victory") in the first place.

Chomsky's argument is false because Newman's thesis (that JFK was secretly planning to withdraw regardless of the military situation) is 1) speculative, as Chomsky correctly says, and 2) unnecessary to establish the fact that the policy was reversed after the assassination, as Chomsky fails to realize. This is why I say it is a false debate--because it is about 1), not 2). The irony is that Chomsky's clear presentation of the facts regarding 2), as opposed to Newman's, supports a conspiracy view of the assassination. It is enough to say that two days after the assassination the CIA and other intelligence agencies began to reverse their assessment of the military situation--retrospectively, dating the deterioration from July--and hence to reverse the withdrawal policy. Chomsky says this (without using the term "withdrawal policy," which he refuses to use the way everyone else uses it)--not Newman. We do not need any secret intentions of JFK to pose the question of the relation between the assassination and Vietnam policy. All we need to do is establish what actually happened, according to the documentary record. What happened is that JFK was killed, and two days later the CIA et al. suddenly realized they had been losing the war for the past five months, and the appropriate policy change was made. This may have been pure coincidence (as Chomsky and Schlesinger both assume, Chomsky tacitly and Schlesinger explicitly), but once the facts are stated clearly, they reek of conspiracy.

A pity you could not hang around a little longer in Washington. I considered storming the podium after your fine speech and introducing myself, but you were surrounded. Next time I will. I did talk with John briefly, and I found him very pleasant and friendly. I wish we could have talked more, and I hope we will be able to another time. I'm surprised, frankly, that you take my letter as a personal attack on him, which it clearly is not. I am asking him about things that are "public domain," i.e., his acknowledged intelligence background and what he has publicly stated and written. Since these are fairly complicated issues, it is better to discuss them in writing and publicly, so that other people can participate. You are the first to reply in this mode, and I'm glad you did. I hope John also replies. I think such exchanges will lead to more solidarity, not less--unless, of course, it turns out that there is something seriously dividing us, in which case solidarity has no virtue anyway. That is what we need to find out. There is nothing to be gained by keeping mum and pretending to agree on things that in fact we've never even discussed.

Sincerely,

Michael Morrissey